

South Africa is the continent's COVID epicenter. Here is how it is transitioning into recovery mode

South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa looked appropriately dour, and sounded appropriately cautious, as he appeared on national television [recently] to warn of the dangers of a second wave of infections and to urge the public against relaxing their guard against the virus.

And yet the president's key message was a simple, optimistic and impressive truth.

"We have succeeded in overcoming the worst phase of this epidemic," he declared.

As the infection rate here sinks below an important threshold of one new case per day per 100,000 people, South Africa is moving – with relief, and with some pride – into a new phase.

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With almost all economic activity resuming, the nation's borders slowly opening, and one of the world's earliest and strictest lockdowns ending, this feels like a significant moment – an opportunity to take stock, even to celebrate, and to explore the ever-thorny issue of who, or what, should share most credit for containing Covid-19.

"I had visions of Italy... that we're not ready, that we're going to get overwhelmed," recalled Professor Salim Abdool Karim – chair of the government's Covid-19 advisory panel and the public face of the scientific community – thinking back to March, and to what he and the government publicly warned was an oncoming viral "storm".

Instead, very few hospitals were overwhelmed, and the official death toll of some 15,000 is significantly lower than even the most optimistic modelling predicted.

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